

Literacy and Undocumented Immigrant Youth in a Federal Detainment Center: Working Toward a Better Future

Abstract: This report discusses results of a study of the roles of literacy in the lives of unaccompanied, undocumented immigrant youth in a detainment center in the United States.

Data were gathered to understand the literacy expectations placed upon youth by the context of their detainment, the literacy knowledge and skills that the adolescents brought to the process of doing so, and the provisions made by the U.S. government in its detention centers to assist the youth in bridging the gap between what is needed and the knowledge and skills they have. Findings suggest that there exists a severe disconnect between the literacy ability of youth in the center and the literacy demands placed upon them as they navigate the context of their surroundings, including the immigration system. Document analysis revealed that

documents crucial to immigration proceedings were written at levels far exceeding the literacy abilities of youth in the center. Implications speak to the need for policymakers within the realms of immigration and education to: 1) shed more light on the needs of this growing population in the United States, 2) revise the federal documents required of youth as they navigate the immigration system and 3) implement procedures by which federal and local staff can help detained youth understand and process the literacy involved in adjudicating their immigration cases.

Keywords: immigration, ELLs, literacy practices, youth detainment, educational policy and adolescent literacy

Introduction: This report presents results from, and implications of, a descriptive case study that examined the detainment experiences and literacy practices of undocumented, unaccompanied immigrant youth at a secure detainment center in the United States run by the Office of Refugee Resettlement and

overseen by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Findings suggest a severe disconnect between the literacy demands of the processes and documents used by the center to guide youth through their detainment and the literacy practices and skill levels of the youth themselves. Implications speak to the need for immigration and educational reform, indicating an urgent need for policy makers to address the needs of this quickly growing and largely overlooked population of immigrant youth.

Background: Every year, thousands of immigrant youth take dangerous journeys to the United States and thousands more live in protective shadows throughout the nation. Labeled *unaccompanied alien children* by the federal government, this group consists of

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immigrants under the age of 18 who have been “separated from both parents and are not being cared for by an adult who, By law or custom, is responsible to do so.” If discovered to be without any such adults, undocumented minors are considered an unauthorized presence by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and are apprehended by the Department of Homeland Security (DHS). After apprehension, the care and placement of these youth are the responsibility of the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR).

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After apprehension, youth are sent to one of a network of over 350 secure detainment centers throughout the United States (Haddal, 2008; Wessler, 2011). In these centers, the youth spend anywhere from one month to two years (the average current length of stay has, in the past year, dropped to approximately one month) while a determination is made regarding whether they will be reunited with a sponsor in the U.S., deported to the home country, or taken in by foster care or another group home. All placements are dependent upon the youth's immigration plea, a legal proceeding.

This population of immigrant youth has in recent years increased in an unprecedented, rapid manner, growing from 6,775 in FY2011 to a projected 23,500 referrals in FY2013 (Administration for Children and Families, 2013). Apprehensions of unaccompanied children at the US-Mexico border alone increased to 38,833 in FY 2013 (Migration Information Source, 2014), and it is anticipated that for 2014 the number of unaccompanied children entering the United States from Mexico, El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala in FY 2014 will be between 60,000 (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2014) and 90,000 (Saffren, 2014). A June 2014 report from the Pew Charitable Trust notes that the number of Latino children caught attempting to enter the US has doubled in less than a year (Krogstad & Gonzalez-Barrera, 2014). During the first half of 2014, the issue of unaccompanied immigrant youth has reached a kind of crescendo, with stories, reports, leaked photos of overcrowded detention centers and editorials appearing in a range of media from NPR ([click here](#); [and here](#)) to the *New York Times* ([click here](#)) to Huffington Post ([click here](#)) to *Mother Jones* ([click here](#)), and concern being expressed by state and federal officials (e.g., the governors of Texas and Arizona, Jeh Johnson, Secretary of Homeland Security), including President Obama who called it "an urgent humanitarian situation."

A Study of Literacy in the Lives of Apprehended Immigrant Youth: During 2012-2013, we researched the roles of literacy in the lives of teenage youth present in one secure detainment center, the World's Children House (WCH) (pseudonym). The research was prompted by ongoing work of the UIC Center for Literacy that seeks to advise policymakers and educators about a variety of issues related to the practice of literacy in the lives of children and adolescents in current and future society. This study in a Department of Homeland Security/Office of Refugee Resettlement de-

tainment center focused on answering two main questions:

1. What literacy expectations are placed upon unaccompanied adolescent immigrants by the WCH?
2. What are the literacy practices and events of adolescents in the WCH?

Thus, research focused on understanding the literacy necessary for the adolescents to negotiate the adjudication of their cases, the literacy knowledge and skills that the adolescents brought to the process of doing so, and the provisions made by the U.S. government in its detention centers to assist the youth in bridging the gap between what is needed and the knowledge and skills they have.

Study Framework & Methodology

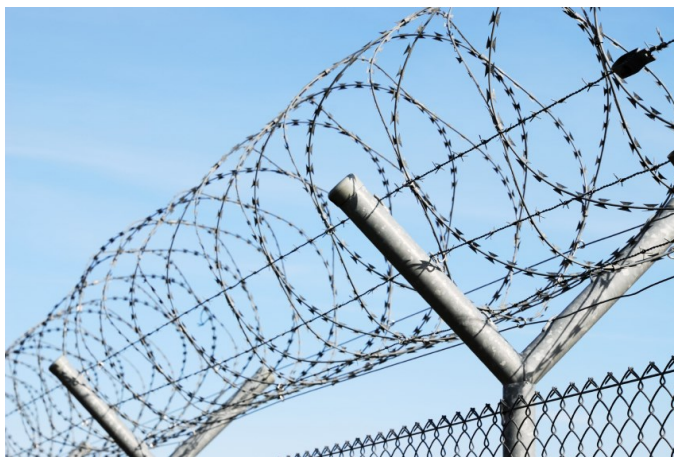
Setting. The World's Children House is located in a large Midwestern city with a diverse population. WCH provides housing, counseling, case management, medical care, recreation, family reunification, and education services to approximately 300 male and female children per year, aged birth to 17, who have been apprehended by the Department of Homeland Security. WCH is licensed by the Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) as a Child Care Institution and has successfully been operated since 1995 by a large human rights organization, Midwest NPO (pseudonym) under a Cooperative Agreement with the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) to serve unaccompanied immigrant children. It is one of the most language-diverse centers of this kind in the nation, with over 20 languages spoken by the children in its care. The WCH has been recognized as an exemplary center of this kind nation-wide, being accredited by the Commission on the Accreditation of Rehabilitation Facilities (CARF). Also, Midwest NPO has opened seven additional, similar centers since the WCH, and it is believed that the ORR would not have secured funding for these many additional centers if the federal government were not pleased with the quality of Midwest NPO and the WCH programming and operations.

Methods. A descriptive case study was conducted over a period of six weeks in order to examine the two research questions. The adolescent youth being studied were observed in their various contexts of daily experience at the WCH, staff were interviewed, and student artifacts and center documents were analyzed. The observation and interview data were analyzed in conjunction with a detailed description of the physical environment and

procedures of the WCH. Thus, multiple data sources were used in a converging way (Duke & Mallette, 2004; Yin 1994) to develop a comprehensive understanding of the literacy-related experiences of the youth within the context of the WCH.

Participants.

- *Youth:* During the course of the study, a total of 70 children, aged 3-17, resided in the center (55 boys and 15 girls). This study focused on adolescents present in the center for the period of the study. The vast majority of adolescents in the WCH during this period came from Central America—El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras—and there were a few youth from Mexico. Because of confidentiality issues, ORR did not permit youth to be formally interviewed for the study, but approximately (numbers changed as youth entered and departed) 30 adolescents were observed in their everyday WCH contexts, and 8 participants were regularly observed in their classrooms and turned in classroom artifacts for analysis.
- *WCH Staff:* Directors, Associate Director, Family Reunification Specialists (FRS—find temporary placement for youth as they undergo immigration proceedings), Clinician (works with FRS to help youth transition to WCH), Residential Instructor (develops, assesses, and implements all education courses) and Caseworker (general supervision of minors in the center).
- *Midwest NPO Staff:* Manager of Educational Services Director of Youth and Residential Services.



(Istock Photo / Getty Images)

Data Sources. The specific data sources included in the research were the following:

- *Interviews:* Semi-structured interviews were conducted with WCH staff listed previously in order to better understand the specific practices and expectations of minors as they navigate the context. Each staff member participated in one or two, 45-60 minute interviews. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed for analysis.
- *Observations:* Observations focused on the interactions between staff and the adolescents at the center as well as on youth and their interactions in their various everyday activities in the WCH.
- *Document analyses:* Extensive paperwork is utilized in the WCH to maintain federal standards and move children/youth through the system. Analyses were completed on documents involved in all phases of a youth's stay at the WCH, from entry to final disposition of his/her case. These included documents associated with each youth's legal case and family reunification case, WCH internally-created documents related to schedule, rules, protocol of living, etc. in the WCH, and documents related to the academic program of the WCH (readings, homework, etc.).
- *Youth-created artifacts:* Artifacts—print that youth had/placed in their rooms or other areas of the WCH (posters, room décor) and personal essays youth had written as part of their educational activities in the WCH—contributed to understanding the role that literacy plays in the center, and assisted in identifying youths' willingness to participate in, or understand such literacy events.

Data Analysis

All data sources were examined through the process of constant comparative analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Lincoln & Guba, 1965). Literacy practices and events were the initial focus of the data analysis. The events in which literacy played a role and the practices associated with those events were the focus of this phase of the data analysis. Information from documents, staff interviews, and observations of youth and staff were triangulated with each other in determining the nature of literacy for youth in the center.

In addition, extensive document analyses were conducted on the texts that were part of youths' legal, educational, and personal activities while in the WCH in order to ex-

amine the (1) types, (2) features, and (3) difficulty levels of texts youth interacted with in the center. Both quantitative features (Coh-Metrix analysis [McNamara, et al., 2005] for reading difficulty level, word count for length) and qualitative features (e.g., images, tables) of the texts as well as the uses/roles of the documents (e.g., mandatory/not mandatory, filled out by staff or by youth) were examined. The final feature of each document assessed was what we called ‘Stakes to Case,’ i.e., how crucial the document is in the ultimate decision made for the youths’ cases: N—not important, S—somewhat important, V—very important. A “V” document, for instance, would be mandatory and extremely important in a youth’s navigation through his/her case while in the center.

Findings

Sources of Literacy and Domains of Literacy Activity

This initial phase of data analysis indicated that two sources accounted for the literacy in the lives of youth at the WCH:

System-Imposed Literacies: literacy events and practices that take place as a result of the WCH and federal government protocol and rules, and the overall influence of the WCH contexts on the experiences of the detained immigrants.

Youth-Enacted Literacies: literacy events and practices that adolescents initiate and participate in independently within the contexts of the WCH. In order to capture fully the range and complexity of literacy events/practices for the youth, instances were characterized as youth-enacted literacies both when a written text was present/created or when a written text was central to a youth’s activity, even if it was not physically present (e.g., a Clinician and youth directly discuss one of the WCH orientation documents in talking about the youth’s behavior; a Family Reunification Specialist and youth discuss the content of the legal documents that were part of a previous meeting with the lawyer).

A concurrent finding from this phase of the analysis was that literacy in the World Children’s House was integral to the following four primary Domains of Activity in the lives of the youth being detained there:

Decision-Making: reading and writing that were part of the Family Reunification Case and the Legal Case.

Orientation: reading and writing that were part of the exposure to the values, expectations, rules, and ideals with in the WCH context and the immigration legal system as youth arrive at the WCH.

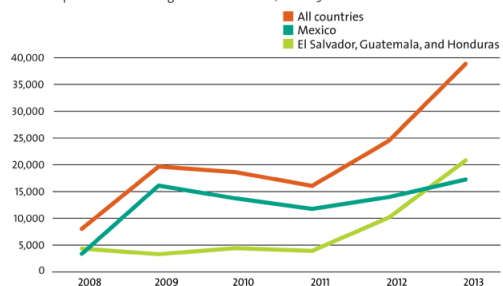
Educational Services: reading and writing related to schooling activities involved in the WCH educational program.

Downtime: reading and writing that youth engaged in during non-scheduled periods.



The Child Migrant Surge

Unaccompanied children caught at the US border, 2008-13



Source: US Customs and Border Patrol

Mother Jones

Table 1. *Literacy Activities of Youth in the WCH*

Domain of Activity	Source of Literacy Activity	
	System-Imposed Literacies	Youth-Enacted Literacies
Decision-Making	Legal (n = 103)	Legal (n = 53)
	Family Reunification (n = 106)	Family Reunification (n = 36)
Orientation	Screening (n = 67)	Reflection (n = 53)
	Entry (n = 57)	
Educational Services	Teacher Expectations (n = 99)	Student role (n = 0)
Downtime	N/A	Entertainment (n = 23)
		Religion (n = 11)
Total	n = 432	n = 176

The frequencies reported in Table 1 indicate two primary findings:

1. By far, the source accounting for the greatest amount of reading and writing that youth engage in while at the center is System-Imposed (71% as compared to 29% Youth-Enacted)
2. What is required for the adjudication of each youth’s case (i.e., Decision-Making) is the domain most highly influencing the degree to which literacy mediates the observed youths’ activities while at the Center (49% of all literacy events observed, 48% of System-Imposed events, 51% of Youth-Enacted events)

These main findings were further examined by analyzing, for both System-Imposed Literacies and Youth-Enacted Literacies, (a) the documents that youth interacted with and (b) the ways in which and degree to which literacy played a role in mediating these activities.

System-Imposed Literacies

Documents that Are Part of Center Life for Youth. Document analyses were central to understanding the System-Imposed Literacies that youth were involved with in the WCH. Documents associated with System-Imposed Literacies were present in all Domains of Activity, and some domains involved more than one type of literacy/document, as is summarized in Table 2. The Domains of Activity in Table 2 are listed from the most to the least prevalent uses for enacting literacy in the WCH.

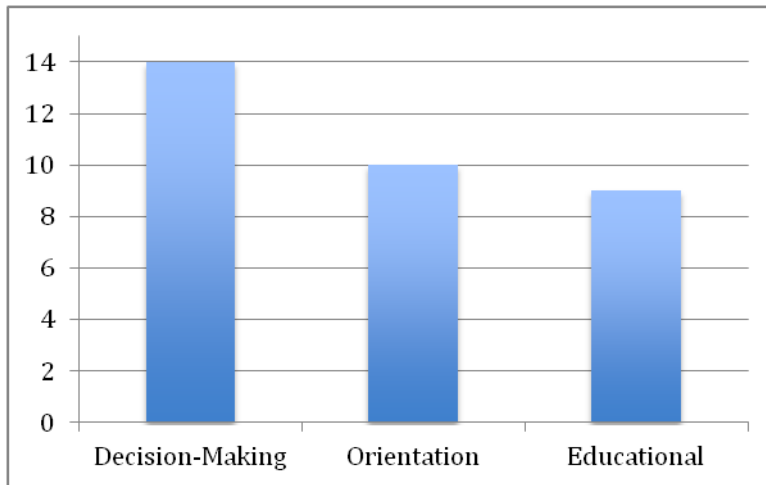
The WCH routinely maintains the documents a youth was required to interact with in approximately five languages and hires translators for less common languages. Thus, all system-imposed documents at the WCH are typically available in the youth’s native language; or if a native language document is not available, a translator mediates the text orally, translating it while reading it aloud to the youth.

Table 2. *Documents Youth Were Required to Interact With*

Degree of Prevalence	Domain of Activity	System-Imposed Literacy	Document Type
	Higher	Decision-Making	Legal
		Family Reunification	<i>Family Reunification documents</i>
	Orientation	Screening and Entry	<i>WCH documents</i> <i>Federal documents</i>
Lower	Educational Services	Teacher Expectations	<i>Academic documents</i>

Figure 1 contains the results of the Coh-Metrix analyses, which were performed to indicate the grade level difficulty of the texts that were part of the Decision-Making, Orientation, and Educational Services in the WCH.

Figure 1.



Average Readability Grade Levels of Documents

One Residential Instructor at the WCH estimated that the average native language reading level of adolescents she worked with in the center was between second and third grade. With respect to reading in English, another Residential Instructor said, "...on average, I'd probably say they are pre-reading, so they are not really literate in English." Researcher observation in a wide range of center contexts confirmed these comments to be the case for the vast majority of the youth there—most were reading at the level of typical primary grade (1-3) students. But it was also noted that variation existed among the youth. A few, for instance, read at native language grade levels up to high school, whereas others were not able to read at all, even in their native language. In fact, a small number of youth at the center could barely write their names.

Given these findings, Figure 1 indicates that the literacy ability of youth in the center is starkly different from the average readability grade levels of documents used for Decision-Making, Orientation, and Academic/Educational activities. As noted in Figure 1, the documents centrally and routinely used as part of these activi-

ties range between Grade 9 (Educational documents) and college level difficulty (Decision-Making Documents) in terms of readability.

This is especially problematic in the Decision-Making domain, the overriding activity for each youth detained in the WCH. Decision-Making centrally involves the resolution of a youth's case. Youth need to engage in speaking, reading and writing while making important decisions about their family reunification case and legal case. Both the Legal documents and Family Reunification documents involved in Decision-Making are mandatory parts of Family Reunification and Legal activities and, as noted above, were the documents found to be the most prevalent uses of literacy in the WCH context. Therefore, out of all of the system-imposed literacies, these documents are the most vital to the youths' futures: they were integral in such decisions as whether the youth would be able to stay in the United States or not, where a youth would be placed upon leaving the WCH, and much more.

Thus, all Decision-Making documents had Very Important—V 'Stakes to Case' ratings. Again, since the youth at the center are unaccompanied, they are responsible on their own for making many critical decisions on the direction of their case. This makes the discrepancy between the youths' reading skill levels and the readability levels of the documents mediating this domain all the more significant.

“To understand these documents, you need to be well read...”

In interviews, numerous staff indicated that the legal documents were a source of confusion for youth. One Caseworker noted that she works “to break (legal documents) down, and you have to explain to them in a way that they (the youth) can understand in a different language.” The ‘language’ she referred to in this instance is not Spanish or another world language, but a reference to the readability of the documents. A Residential Instructor's comment expands on the Caseworker's statement:

“To understand these documents, you need to be well read in documents like that. I have trouble reading legal documents sometimes, so I don't know that they are necessarily sat with and explained what each section means and the importance of it.”

Most Decision-Making documents used at the WCH were created externally by the Immigrant Law Center (ILC) (pseudonym), and although the ILC representative in any meeting with youth orally reads all of the documents to the them in their native language, all WCH staff interviewed about these documents indicated that they suspect that youth do not understand the vast majority of the content of the documents. As indicated in Figure 1, the average grade level of all Decision-Making documents was college (Grade 14), with Legal documents averaging Grade 17 level and Family Reunification documents (which were created by both the WCH and the Office of Refugee Resettlement) averaging Grade 11.

Activities Related to System-Imposed Literacies: Legal Meetings. Legal meetings were the main decision-making activities observed within the center. WCH staff are not allowed to give legal advice to youth at the center, but are often called upon to help youth better understand their options. The formal legal meetings are led by the ILC and/or other federal agencies. The legal meeting is perhaps the most confusing of all contexts for minors detained at the WCH. In numerous interviews, for example, WCH staff maintained that often youth do not even know they had met with a lawyer in the meeting they had. Some of this is because ILC staff members introduce themselves as “paralegals,” a term that the youth are unfamiliar with. Other times, youth think the lawyers are advocates or clinicians—they do not realize that what is being said in the short meeting can have a profound effect on the outcome of their legal case. One WCH staff member who expressed frustration with the legal meetings stated, “I don’t think sometimes they understand any of the concepts that the lawyers are explaining to them. I think they are not ready.” Staff also had numerous observations about youths’ meetings with ILC staff. One WCH Family Reunification Specialist noted,

“I had many experiences after they meet the lawyer, they got upset or they got completely confused. So we need to follow up with the kids. Because if they completely misunderstood or they don’t understand at all, that is not okay.”

Perhaps the biggest disconnect observed between literacy demands of the context and youths’ literacy abilities occurred in conjunction with the Legal activities that youth participated in.

Perhaps the biggest disconnect observed between literacy demands of the context and youths’ literacy abilities occurred in conjunction with the Legal activities that youth participated in. Although youth were consistently encouraged to seek clarification on anything they may not have understood while in meetings or other interactions related to their legal cases, many did not do so. In one observation during a family reunification discharge meeting, for instance, an adolescent female was being walked through the discharge process and a considerable amount of information was being discussed. The entire conversation was in the adolescent’s native language, Spanish, but much of it dealt with legal paperwork (e.g., which document serves as an I.D., which document should be used for a visit to the doctor and to go to school, how to call the Immigration hotline to learn about the court date). After the Family Reunification Specialist talked for approximately ten minutes, she looked up and said (in Spanish), “If you understand everything so far, I need you to sign this paperwork. It’s part of your discharge paperwork, okay?” The adolescent signed the paperwork and the Family Reunification Specialist asked, “Do you understand well?” The adolescent said, “Si (yes).” The Family Reunification Specialist asked her if she was sure; and again, she said, “Si.” So they moved forward with the meeting. The meeting lasted approximately 40 minutes, and the only question the adolescent asked during the entire time was if she could still study in the United States even though she was pregnant. When the Family Reunification Specialist told her yes, she asked again, just to verify that she had heard correctly.

Activities Related to System-Imposed Literacies: Orientation. When youth arrive at the WCH, they are expected to follow numerous procedures associated with Orientation, the domain that involved the second largest number of literacy activities for the youth. Orientation involves a participant’s initial exposure to the values, expectations, rules and ideals within the WCH context and to the immigration legal system of the United States, in which the youth were now involved. Some documents used as part of Orientation were federal documents (from the Office of Refugee Resettlement), and others were developed at the WCH.

The average readability level of all Orientation documents was Grade 10, with documents used to mediate the initial WCH screening process scoring at Grade 8 and the average of federal documents being Grade 16. Many of the federal documents must be read and filled out by the sponsor and subsequently signed by the minor. All federal documents related to screening and entry had V (high) ‘Stakes to Case’ ratings, and all were mandatory.

WCH staff strive to find a balance between comfort and protection during the screening process. One on hand, WCH staff members reassure the youth and help them feel at ease; on the other hand, they question everything a youth says in order to verify the accuracy of their story. The challenge related to comprehension of screening documents was noted by the WCH Director:

“Even though it’s in their language, sometimes their literacy isn’t where it needs to be, so sometimes we’ll tell them, ‘Do you understand?’ If not, we’ll read it for them. Really, most of the house rules and orientation that we do with them individually, it involves more intimate conversations about ‘Ok, do you understand what we’re doing? In the house these are our rules. Do you understand them?’ And then after going through each one of them, they sign off on this orientation checklist just so we’re reminding ourselves that we are hitting everything that we wanted to hit while they are in the program. So we try. We try to make sure that all of the kids understand what they are doing—at least to that point of orientation and rules.”

Activities Related to System-Imposed Literacies: Educational Services. Research findings related system-imposed literacies surrounding the Educational/Academic domain largely involved the educational services within the center. Each minor detained in the WCH attends the center’s academic program for six hours a day. The main class is English Language Learning (ELL). Other studies focus on Math, Reading, Science, Social Studies, Art, Music, and Physical Education. Numerous educational documents were mandatory (e.g., youth were required to take an intake and discharge language assessment, learn classroom rules, and complete homework), but all of the educational activities/documents were low in terms of ‘stakes to case’ (i.e., they in no way affected the outcome of the youth’s immigration case). Educational documents used at the WCH yielded an average readability level of Grade 9 on the Coh-Metrix document analysis. Compared to System

-Imposed documents in the other two domains, documents used in conjunction with educational activities were significantly easier in terms of readability. It should also be noted that Educational Services documents were largely created within the WCH, rather than coming from an outside source.

The role of education at the WCH served as a form of entry for immigrant youth into the American academic experience. As noted, the key focus of the WCH educational program is English learning, but what makes the WCH classroom experience unique is the amount of attention placed upon life skills and behavior. As the Manager of Educational Services stated:

“...that they are learning, that they are studying, that they are using the skills that we’ve taught them to be able to use when they leave. Not just that we are teaching them so they can pass the test, but that they can learn community vocabulary. So that when they get on a bus when they are gone in two weeks with their families, so they can understand, okay, this is your-the next stop, or we’re turning left on this street, and that kind of stuff.”

One of the observed literacy activities youth were asked to do at the Center in the Educational domain was to describe their home life, expectations of America, and what they thought of the country now that they were here. Following are sections of essays that ELL Advanced Course group wrote during two classroom observations. We include this sample of writings to indicate the range of experiences that such youth have had in their journeys to the US and also provide insight into their expectations of life in America as compared to the home country.

Student A: *My life in my country was good because I study every day. I liked to be with my brother and friends. I thought America would be a country very develop for its money and work. America is different because I understand now very it’s work and much work little money. My life in [WCH] is good because I’m studying English, I have clothe and I can eat.*

Student B: *My life in my country was very difficult because my family did not have money. I thought America had much work and money because is very big. America is difficult and difference because I miss my family and culture. My life in [WCH] is good because I am study and have food.*

Student C. *My life in my country sometimes was happy, but I always worked every day. Sometimes I was sad because sometimes I didn't have friends. I always worked so that my family was good. I thought America is rich because come of different countries. In my country the people is poor there have no money. That is why I come here. That is my thought. When I lived in my country my father thought it too. I think America is beautiful. Sometimes I am sad because I miss my family. Now I am to worry because next I going to my country. I no want to go in my country, but I go.*

Student D. *My life in my country was worrying because I don't have more protection. I thought America would be give me more protect. America is like family to save protect me. My life in [WCH] is safe. Because in here I have protect.*

Also in the ELL classes language brokering and code-switching were frequently observed. In the beginners ELL class, for example, the (native Arabic speaking) Residential Instructor was trying to explain to his students to draw a picture and put it on the bulletin board. They seemed confused so he clarified, with the help of his students, "We do dibuja and put it aqui." (We do the drawing and put it here).

A large number of students at the WCH were determined to learn the English language. This topic served as both a goal and fear for youth within the center. Table 3 summarizes a few of the advanced ELL students' essays, showing their thoughts surrounding the notion of learning English and feelings related to their immediate futures, whether in the US or, in the case of Student 2, back in his home country.

Table 3. Student Artifacts, Essay 2

Student	Legal Status	After the WCH	School or other plans	Feelings
1	Staying in the United States with sponsor to pursue an immigration case	<i>My life will be difficult because it something new for me.</i>	<i>I will live in New York, they will speak English. I will go to school. I will go to a very big school. I will study to become a dentist.</i>	<i>I feel nervous to go to school because it's a new school with new people.</i>
2	To be deported to home country	<i>I think my life is going to be difficult because when I am going to arrive maybe I have no job.</i>	<i>They will not speak English, only Spanish. I will not go to school. I would like to work, I would like to see shoes to make money.</i>	<i>I feel good because I will have my best friends.</i>
3	Staying in the United States with a sponsor to pursue an immigration case	<i>My life will be happy because I am going to be united with my family and my sister.</i>	<i>I will live in South Carolina. They speak English. I will go to school. I will go to high school. I will study to become a doctor.</i>	<i>I feel happy to go to school because I need to learn English.</i>
4	Staying in the United States with a sponsor to pursue an immigration case	<i>My life will be difficult or easy because I don't know my future.</i>	<i>I will live in Los Angeles with my father. He speaks English and Spanish. I will go to school, I don't know where the school is. I don't know what kind of school. I would like to study how to be a cook.</i>	<i>I feel nervous about going to school or working because the first day will be difficult.</i>
5	Staying in the United States with a sponsor to pursue an immigration case	<i>My life will be difficult because everything is different. I will have to learn to live.</i>	<i>I will live in New York. They will speak English. I will go to school. I will go to a high school far from my house. I would like to study to be a forensic doctor.</i>	<i>I feel happy and nervous for the first day.</i>
6	Staying in the United States with a sponsor to pursue an immigration case	<i>My life will be full of stimulation because I like to make myself better. I need to constantly raise myself up.</i>	<i>I will live in Ohio because my family is there. They speak English. I will go to school in Ohio. I will go to finance school. I would like to study cook.</i>	<i>I feel very happy but my English very bad. I need to effort study it.</i>

Youth-Enacted Literacies

As noted earlier, when examining the results related to Youth-Enacted Literacies, it should be kept in mind that in attempting to capture as fully as possible the range and complexity of literacy events/practices for the youth, we considered youth-enacted literacies as occurring both when a written text was present/created or when a written text was central to a youth's activity even if it was not physically present. So, for example, if there was a conversation initiated by a teen and directed to a WCH staff member about one of the Legal documents or a question about one of the WCH forms, such an interaction was coded as an instance of Youth-Enacted Literacy whether the document was present or not.

Youth did not enact literacy activities nearly as frequently as they engaged in literacy required by the system—the government/WCH—in which they were embedded. Slightly under 30% of the literacy activities observed during the course of research were Youth-Enacted. Of these, half (51%) were involved with Decision-Making, another 30% with Orientation, and 19% occurred in conjunction with the youths' Downtime. None of the Education related activities observed during the study were Youth-Enacted—all stemmed from what happened in conjunction with the Educational Services provided by the WCH that the youth were required to attend daily.

Activities Related to Youth-Enacted Literacies: Decision-Making. Youth-Enacted literacy activities in this domain typically involved attempts by youth to heighten their understanding and/or processing of the case facing them. When the detained adolescents turn 18, for instance, they are not tried as minors, but as adults; and their cases get considerably more complex and, for them, more difficult to resolve. Thus, a youth approaching age 18 must act quickly in order to move his/her case forward, so as not to be taken to jail. As a past WCH director and current employee of Midwest NPO noted, "I've seen kids who are approaching 18 having to file their own asylum applications when the [ILC] isn't able to help them."

In addition to the legal case, the other major decision that youth must make while detained regards their family reu-

Choosing which pathway to pursue for family reunification is on the shoulders of the minors, regardless of what their families want them to do.

nification case. Choosing which pathway to pursue for family reunification is on the shoulders of the minors, regardless of what their families want them to do. During initial meetings with Family Reunification Specialists, youth often created visual family trees and wrote family details from memory in order for their case to be developed. Here, rather than have to rely solely on a verbal explanation of the family tree (which can be very complicated), youth tended to employ simple family vocabulary and drawing skills in order to explain where they came from, how they got here, where they hope to go, and the key players involved in their case.

Activities Related to Youth-Enacted Literacies: Orientation. Youth-enacted literacy activities related to Orientation were primarily engaged in for the purpose of reflection, with youth reading or writing on their own in order to think more about their WCH/legal case experiences and seek clarification on processes.

Youth were also observed creating environmental literacy (in the form of cards and posters) in order to be hung as decoration throughout the WCH. In these instances, youth primarily enacted literacy to express gratitude for the support they had received at the WCH. Examples of such literacies lined the walls of the Family Reunification office. Following are examples of messages on various cards from youth (written in numerous languages):

- I am very happy to go to my family.
- I love you, thanks for helping me with my case.
- I don't even know how to thank you.
- Thank you [WCH] family for helping me.
- I'm very grateful for all of the help you have given me, may God bless you and those nearest to you forever.

In addition to letters of gratitude, numerous youth-created posters were displayed throughout the center to explain the rules and protocol of the WCH to newly arriving peers. In the cafeteria, for instance, students had written a poster about bullying and the expectations to report such behavior. On other posters, such as the "Multilanguage Poster" which also hung in the cafeteria, youth had translated common phrases into English, Spanish, French, Mandarin, Punjabi, Gujarati, Dari and Arabic to increase communication within the center.

Activities Related to Youth-Enacted Literacies: Downtime. The two aforementioned areas of activity accounted for the vast majority (over 80%) of youth-enacted literacy enactments at the center. However, observations also indicated that some youth engaged in reading or writing during their free time in the evenings or on weekends, outside of the context of meetings or other WCH-orchestrated activities. In this Downtime, 24 minors were observed requesting books and other text materials, including novels, English language learning workbooks, Bibles, the Quran, and journals. Texts were requested in both English and native languages. The majority of these free time (which is given in increments throughout the day and lasts anywhere from 30 minutes to three hours) literacy activities involved drawing, writing down song lyrics, writing in journals, practicing English and reading the Bible, Quran or another religious text. Some students came up with their own vocabulary/phrase lists. For these, youth would write down phrases in their native language and find out how to say each in English. Such literacy activities sprang from the independent desire to improve in English.

Additionally, numerous youth were observed writing in personal journals during free time. When asked what the youth generally seem to write about in their journals, a Caseworker said, "I don't know exactly what they are all writing about, but some of the kids tell me that they're writing about their experiences." Youth also copied song lyrics and/or scripture in their native language and decorated their bedroom walls with them. Nearly every bedroom in the center was covered with youth-created posters that had some reference to the home country. Also, they often spent their free time listening to music and many sat with their dictionary while listening in order to translate as many words as they could. They were observed singing the songs back while reading the lyrics or asking peers and staff to help them translate meaning. Additionally, observations as well as interviews indicated that some youth engaged with text as part of religious practice during free time. A large percentage of the minors living at the WCH during the study were observed praying, reading and reflecting on the Bible, Quran or other holy texts during their free time.

...there is a severe disconnect between the reading and language involved in adjudicating a case and the reading and language abilities of the youth themselves.

Conclusions: This research attempted to understand:

- the literacy necessary for detained, undocumented, unaccompanied immigrant adolescents to negotiate the adjudication of their cases while in a United States Office of Refugee Resettlement detention center and
- the literacy knowledge and skills adolescent youth brought to the process of doing so.

We found that the vast majority of the youths' literacy activities while in the detention center arose from what we termed System-Imposed Literacies. These activities involved the reading and writing that were part of the Orientation of youth when they arrived at the center, the Educational Services program they were required to attend daily, and, most of all, the Decision-Making that is at the heart of the adjudication of their cases.

Moreover, the central finding from the study is that there is a severe disconnect between the reading and language involved in adjudicating a case and the reading and language abilities of the youth themselves. Virtually all of the documents that youth were expected to use in order to mediate and make sense of their surroundings while in the center and their legal cases that were to be resolved were written at a level well above their literacy capacity.

Given the literacy gap that existed between the reading and language demands of the context and virtually all of the youths' literacy knowledge and skills, we also examined the provisions made by the government/center staff to assist the youth in bridging the gap. Although interviews and observations revealed that WCH staff were generally quite aware of the difficulties youth faced in understanding and responding to Legal, Family Reunification, and even some Screening/Entry documents, few provisions were enacted through federal channels to help youth with the processes involved in comprehending and responding to the documents in formal meetings related to the disposition of their legal case or family reunification case, other than providing the information and discussion in each youth's native or stronger language—which, while helpful, did not overcome the gap.

Implications for Policy and Practice Related to Literacy: The results of this study indicated that the youth being processed in this secure detention center are safe and are being assisted by staff genuinely concerned with helping them achieve their greatest potential, but also that these youth are in need of additional advocacy to help the public, educators, and policy makers understand better the role that literacy plays in the adjudication of their cases and what can be done to make help youth negotiate the high-stakes literacies that confront the as unaccompanied immigrants.

The experiences of undocumented, unaccompanied immigrant youth detained in the United States are unique and increasingly challenging to understand for a variety of reasons:

- Unclear and sometimes conflicting information and policy exist related to who is responsible for the advocacy of such youth at the federal and local levels.
- Historically there has been less than optimal communication between local and federal agencies in regard to individual cases.
- It is not the responsibility of the local center (in this case the WCH) to provide follow-up services for youth, yet follow-up services are necessary but exceedingly challenging for youth to find and to navigate.
- This population is largely hidden within the larger discussion of English Language Learners in America, especially with respect to educational issues.

This study clearly showed that literacy is a crucial part of the processing of detained youths' cases. Given the substantial mismatch found in this study between the literacy demands of the processing of the youths' cases and the literacy achievement levels of the youth themselves, there are a number of ways in which policies and practices could be revised to afford more appropriate and just experiences for youth while they are in custody at a secure detention center.

Policy and Practice Recommendations: Local Level

- **Intake:** Revamp the first 48 hours in the center for youth so that they see fewer people, the roles of the people they do see are made clear to them, and that emphasis is put on helping the youth gain a sense of trust in the people they interact with.

- **Preparation:**
 - Give youth ample time and opportunity to prepare for any meeting they have that has a Very Important or Somewhat Important Stakes to Case rating:
 - at least 24 hours notice.
 - ensure they know *who* they are meeting with, *why* they are meeting with them and the *effect* the meeting will have on their future.
 - provide a list of frequently asked questions for the meeting (in their home language if necessary).
 - encourage them to write down their own questions prior to the meeting.
- **Itinerary adjustment:**
 - Give youth a clear timeline of events that they will have to participate in.
 - Have center and visiting staff wear nametags that use the same terms that youth have on their timeline.
- **Meetings:**
 - During meetings, provide paper on which youth can take notes and encourage them to do so in order to enhance any subsequent debriefing or discussion.
 - Emphasize to personnel conducting the meetings the importance of ensuring comprehension of the information on the part of the youth and providing them the opportunity to clarify questions that may arise.
- **Relationship with ILC:** Enhance communication between lawyers and detention centers/Family Reunification Specialists (FRS). The FRS cannot give legal advice, but they should have the knowledge and communication skills to explain the legal forms to youth in better detail. Ensure that ILC staff and local center staff have the opportunity to discuss youth's cases in order to avoid confusion and better support youths' understanding of their options.
- **Documents:**
 - Revise documents created by the local center to be written at lower readability levels and to include more images that aid comprehension.
 - Enhance staff skills for helping to mediate (not just translate) the variety of documents youth experience so that youth understand them better.

Policy and Practice Recommendations: Federal Level

- Intake:
 - Review protocol to enhance youths' understanding of information before they sign anything.
- Documents:
 - Revise the immigration, screening and legal documents being used with youth because current documents are written at a level far too difficult for comprehension and the layout and images used in such documents are not designed to support comprehension of the young people whose cases depend on them.
 - Train lawyers in strategies for mediating documents being used (no matter what language they are written in), so that the youth will better understand them.
- Cooperation with local centers:
 - Provide the local center advance notice of meeting times in order to enable them to prepare youth.
 - Have guides "identify" themselves with clear labels and give students a clearly and simply written sheet that help the youth know who is who (e.g., call a lawyer a lawyer; don't use other terms like paralegal, legal assistant, etc. to avoid confusing youth).
- Research:
 - Provide funding for enhanced research from the perspectives of the fields of immigration, policy, education, law and sociology to understand better the population of minors who are unaccompanied, undocumented immigrants.
 - In federally funded research, expand the definition of English Language Learners as well as definition of literacy to make space for this population and the ways in which they have been observed to enact literacy.
 - Analyze existing and needed support systems within the community and local schools for recent immigrant arrivals.

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